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ABSTRACT

This paper presents some results from a group of St. Louis born black males aged 31-36 who were systematically interviewed during the year 1965-66. The sample in this report is deemed a high risk population because the fathers are at very high risk for alcoholism and the children are at high risk for unfavorable school and legal outcomes independently of the father's drinking. The paper presents correlates of alcoholism in the fathers, and the consequences of the father's alcoholism for the school and police records of their children. The study demonstrates a constellation of difficult family settings in which black city reared children are likely to find themselves if they have an alcoholic father. They are more likely to be illegitimate, to have a young father and parents who have not finished high school, to live in a broken home, and to have a father who has been arrested. The association between having an alcoholic father and these circumstances can probably be explained both by intoxication's directly reducing the foresight necessary for taking adequate precautions during intercourse and by the fact that alcoholism is particularly common among men who were impulsive and sexually active youth. Each of the aspects of family life predicted by having an alcoholic father was also associated with truancy and dropout rate in the offspring of these fathers. (Author/AH)

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FATHER'S ALCOHOLISM AND CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES*

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FATHER'S ALCOHOLISM AND CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES

It is generally assumed that having an alcoholic father is a deleterious experience, but we do not know much about the degree to which having such a father is reflected in objective measures of school achievement and delinquency, nor to what extent any relationships found are to be attributed to the alcoholism itself rather than to associated background variables. Since alcoholism appears to be more frequent in men who themselves have had a history of school problems and delinquency (Robins et al., 1962; Robins et al., 1966; Rosenberg, 1969), it is reasonable to consider the possibility that school problems discovered in the children of alcoholics may be transmitted directly—e.g., school problems in the father lead to school problems in the child—and not depend on the father's alcoholism at all. It may also be true that the circumstances of birth are likely to be different for the child of the alcoholic father. The alcoholic may be less responsible about taking contraceptive precautions, so that his children are more often born to very young unmarried parents.

Alcoholism may also affect the circumstances of the child's rearing. The father's alcoholism is likely to cause marital friction and consequent breaking up of the home. Alcoholics have high arrest rates, which may set a criminal example for children or at least lead to separation and poverty when the father is incarcerated. Clearly it is difficult to disentangle the direct effects of the father's alcoholism from these more indirect effects of his background and the consequences of his drinking. Yet it is useful to

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see not only what aspects of the child's adjustment are affected among children of alcoholics, but also whether there are circumstances under which the father's alcoholism seems to have little effect on his children's performance.

This paper presents some results from a sample which we will show to be at high risk in two ways: the fathers are at very high risk for alcoholism and the children are at high risk for unfavorable school and legal outcomes independently of the father's drinking. The paper presents correlates of alcoholism in the fathers, and the consequences of the father's alcoholism for the school and police records of their children.

The Sample

In 1965-66, we gathered data via a systematic interview schedule on 223 St. Louis-born black men aged 31-36. We also collected a large number of records for each of them from police, hospitals, military service, credit bureaus, schools, social agencies, and other record sources. The interview covered the life history, with particular attention to the drinking history as well as other psychiatric symptoms. In addition, it asked the names and years of birth of legitimate children and of the children's mothers. We also asked whether the men had illegitimate children, but did not ask for identifying information, although we recorded it when volunteered. For all children who would have been at least 18 years of age by the end of 1973, we attempted to locate all police, juvenile court, and school records. We required that they had reached the age of 18 to be reasonably sure that we would know whether or not they would ever be high school

graduates and so that all would be past the age at risk of becoming a juvenile delinquent. When we searched for children's records, we also updated their fathers' police records to be certain that we knew all cases in which the fathers had been arrested, and we obtained their mothers' police and school records.

Among the men interviewed, there were 97 (43%) who reported one or more children meeting our age requirement. Because the men were young at interview, only children they fathered before the age of 25 would have been old enough by December 1973 to be included in the study. Thus the children discussed here were all born early in the reproductive period.

A grand total of 197 offspring were potentially eligible, if we could identify them in the appropriate records. However, many were illegitimate children for whom we had not collected identifying data. There were also children whose mothers remarried after divorce and changed the children's names. Not knowing the new name made identification difficult. Finally, for a few legitimate children, out-of-city police and schools did not provide the requested information. At the final accounting, we had obtained some record information for 157 children, whose parents constituted 80 of the 223 men in our original sample and 88 of their wives and girlfriends.

We obtained sufficient elementary school records (six years' worth) to evaluate academic and attendance problems for 132 children, information as to whether or not the child graduated from high school for 137, and information as to whether or not the child had a police record for 153. Information about the offspring comes entirely

from these records, and was coded by persons without knowledge of the father's alcoholism.

Alcoholism in the Fathers

The father's alcoholism status was based on a consensus diagnosis by three psychiatrists, using answers to a comprehensive set of questions in the interview and record abstracts. Alcoholism was counted if it was either the primary diagnosis or secondary to drug addiction, depression, antisocial personality, or other psychiatric diagnosis. The criteria were multiple medical and social difficulties resulting from chronic heavy drinking. The diagnosis was positive if the man met criteria at any time in his life.

Forty-six percent of the fathers who had at least one child for whom records were obtained received a diagnosis of alcoholism. This extremely high rate reflects in part the fact that alcoholics were significantly more likely than other men to have children early in life. Among all men interviewed in the total sample the alcoholism rate was forty-one percent; 46% if they had a child in the study, and 38% if they did not. Thus even without early fatherhood the rate of alcoholism in this population was extraordinary. The high rate was not accounted for by the fact that we supplemented interview data with a great variety of records. The addition of record information made little difference: forty percent of the total sample met criteria for alcoholism by interview alone. Other methodological decisions that may have contributed to the high rates were: First, we accepted the diagnosis of alcoholism whether it was the primary or secondary diagnosis. Alcoholism was usually the secondary diagnosis; for only 16% of the total sample was it the primary diagnosis. Some other studies reporting prevalence of

alcoholism have used a hierarchy of diagnoses which excluded the diagnosis of alcoholism in the presence of selected other diagnoses such as drug addiction or antisocial personality. But even the 16% with primary alcoholism is a high figure, compared with most estimates for American men. Second, men currently abstinent were considered alcoholics if they had ever met criteria at an earlier period, and finally, our criteria for a diagnosis of alcoholism may differ from that in some other studies. We required at least one symptom of alcoholism in three out of four distinct areas among 1) withdrawal symptoms and medical problems; 2) inability to control drinking or drinking unusual substances or drinking at unusual times; 3) interpersonal problems or guilt resulting from drinking; and 4) job or legal troubles or fighting as a consequence of drinking. We have no reason to believe these criteria are less strict than those used elsewhere. Indeed, the symptoms reported were by no means trivial. In the total sample interviewed, 20% reported having the shakes after drinking, 3% reported hospitalization for alcoholism, and 15% reported drunk arrests. More than half of the sample (51%) considered themselves to have had a period of excessive drinking.

Whether or not methodological decisions may help to account for our high rate, we should have expected a high rate of alcoholism in this population. It is entirely young black males who were both urban-born and urban-reared, demographic characteristics shown by Cahalan and Room (1974), Gorwitz et al. (1970), and Zax et al. (1967) to be highly associated both with self-reported drinking problems and with records as an alcoholic.

We noted that the alcoholism rate among the fathers in our sample is high in part because we are only considering children born when they were young men, and early fatherhood is significantly associated

with alcoholism. Among the men who became fathers young enough to have a child eligible for the study, alcoholics are overrepresented among the very youngest fathers. As a result, more alcoholics than non-alcoholics had time to father more than one eligible child. Thus, while 46% of the fathers in our study were alcoholics, 51% of the children studied had an alcoholic father.

Children's Outcomes

We expected that the offspring in our sample would have more than their share of school and police problems. Not only were they children of very young parents, a circumstance that has been shown to be associated with prematurity and later school difficulties, but they were mostly residents in inner-city ghettos. We found that 61% of the children had repeated at least one semester of elementary school, 17% had been seriously truant* or expelled from elementary school, and 36% had dropped out of school before graduation from high school. Twenty-four percent were found to have a police record before age 17.

Association of Father's Alcoholism and Children's Outcomes

Children of alcoholic fathers were more likely to have each of these problems than were other children (Table 1). Among children of alcoholics, 66% had been held back, 24% had been seriously truant, 44% dropped out without graduating, and 28% had been delinquent. Only two of these associations were statistically significant: the relation of having an alcoholic father with dropout and truancy. We will examine to what extent these two statistically significant relationships exist under varying birth and rearing settings.

TABLE 1
ABOUT
HERE

*Absent more than 20% of school days in at least three semesters.

The Relationship of Father's Alcoholism to Circumstances of Birth and Rearing

Children of very young urban black men are likely to experience circumstances of birth and rearing that are not conducive to school success, but children in this group whose fathers were alcoholics had even more difficult circumstances than did their peers. We have already noted that among young fathers, the alcoholics were exceptionally young. Children born before a man is 19 are particularly likely to be born out of wedlock or to parents forced to marry because of the pregnancy. Forced marriages often result in both parents' dropping out of high school, and are also particularly unstable. This means that the children involved are likely to suffer a broken home. Thus the fact that alcoholics have children very young implies that the children will suffer a number of other disadvantages as well. In addition, alcoholics are particularly subject to arrest, even in a population with as high a risk of arrest as urban black young men.

Table 2 shows that a larger proportion of the children of alcoholics than of other children were subject to each of these unfavorable circumstances. More than one-fourth of the children of alcoholics were born before the father was 19, compared with only 9% of other children; almost one-fifth were illegitimate compared with only 7% of other children; approximately three-fourths were born to parents who dropped out of school, compared with about half the other children; and 70% grew up in a broken home, compared with less than half of the other children. Finally, since almost all the alcoholics had been arrested, their children almost all experienced an arrested father, compared with about two-thirds of other children.

When we describe these children as being born to alcoholic fathers, this sounds as though we know that the father was already an alcoholic at the time of the birth of his first child. In fact, the alcoholism was not always present that early. Drinking did, however, begin very young for those diagnosed alcoholic in their middle thirties. The median age at first drink for the alcoholics was 13, compared with 16 for the non-alcoholics. Half the alcoholics reported having their first drinking problem by the age of 22. About one-quarter of their children (28%) were born after they reached 22 and thus probably after the onset of their alcoholism. Men whose alcoholism began early may have become fathers at a young age because intoxication interfered with their taking contraceptive precautions. For those not yet alcoholic, their having children at an exceptionally young age probably reflects the fact that men sexually active early are especially likely to become alcoholics.

Circumstances of Birth and Rearing and School Problems for Children of Alcoholics and Non-Alcoholics

Each of the circumstances of birth and rearing which we found to be characteristic of children born to alcoholic fathers was also significantly associated with children's truancy and dropout, the two school problems significantly predicted by having an alcoholic father. Since one of those circumstances of birth was the father's being a dropout, it was then worth investigating whether children's dropout might not be simply the transmission between generations of school problems, with the father's alcoholism being irrelevant. The second possibility was that the full effect of the alcoholic father on children's school

problems could be explained by his effect on the circumstances of the child's birth and rearing

Table 3 shows truancy and dropout rates of offspring of alcoholics vs. non-alcoholics given each of these circumstances of birth and rearing. The results do not support a simple correspondence between father's and child's graduation irrespective of father's alcoholism. While children of graduate fathers less often dropped out than did children of dropouts both when the father was and was not alcoholic, children whose fathers were both dropouts and alcoholics had an even higher rate of dropout than children of other dropouts. Further, all the other circumstances of rearing which we have shown to be related to the father's alcoholism seem to have some effect.

(TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE)

It is not clear from Table 3 whether or not the father's alcoholism adds any further explanation beyond that accounted for by the disadvantageous circumstances of birth and rearing for which he is responsible. The children of alcoholics had more school problems than did children of non-alcoholic fathers in 20 out of 24 comparisons, holding constant circumstances of birth and rearing one at a time. The exceptions were three for truancy (if the father was a graduate, if the mother was a graduate, or if the father was not arrested); and one for dropout (if the father was a graduate). However, only two relationships between father's alcoholism and children's school success remained significant after controlling for circumstances: the relationship with truancy when the father was a dropout, and the relationship with dropping out if the mother was a high school graduate.

The suggestion of an effect of having an alcoholic father despite control for circumstances of birth and rearing might have been due merely to the fact that, in each comparison, children of alcoholics were more likely than other children to have experienced other circumstances not held constant in that comparison. We could learn whether the effect of the alcoholic father on school achievement was fully explained by his effect on these circumstances of birth and rearing only by controlling on all adverse circumstances simultaneously.

Circumstances of Birth and Rearing Combined

To treat all the adverse effects of an alcoholic father on birth and rearing simultaneously, we counted how many of these six disadvantages each child experienced. As we had anticipated, children of alcoholics were more often multiply disadvantaged. Of children with an alcoholic father, 82% experienced three or more types of disadvantage, compared with 41% of children whose fathers were not alcoholics ($p < .001$). We also found as expected that the number of disadvantaged circumstances predicted both truancy and dropout. Children from the more (3+) disadvantaged settings were seriously truant in 23% of cases, vs. 8% of those less disadvantaged ($p < .05$), and 48% dropped out, as compared with only 13% of the less disadvantaged ($p < .001$).

Once we held constant the total number of disadvantaged circumstances of birth and rearing, there was no significant increase in the risk of either truancy or dropout when the disadvantages resulted from having had an alcoholic father rather than other causes (Table 4).

(TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE)

Children with an alcoholic father but otherwise good circumstances had no

more truancy or dropout than did other advantaged children. Thus the impact of the alcoholic father on his child's school success seems to be largely through the greater likelihood of the child's being illegitimate, having a very young father, having parents who are dropouts, and experiencing a broken home and his father's arrest. Alcoholism that did not lead to such consequences did not seem to affect school performance.

Discussion

Our study has shown a constellation of difficult family settings in which black city-reared children are likely to find themselves if they have an alcoholic father: they are more likely to be illegitimate, to have a young father and parents who have not finished high school, to live in a broken home, and to have a father who has been arrested. The association between having an alcoholic father and these circumstances can probably be explained both by intoxication's directly reducing the foresight necessary for taking adequate precautions during intercourse and by the fact that alcoholism is particularly common among men who were impulsive and sexually active youths. The association of alcoholism with marital disruption and arrest which we found has often been reported. Marriages break up over drinking and non-support; alcoholics commit an excess of property crimes as well as being vulnerable to arrest for public drunkenness.

Each of these aspects of family life predicted by having an alcoholic father was also associated with truancy and dropout in his offspring. While the father's alcoholism greatly increased the risk of experiencing these settings, within these settings his being alcoholic no further increased the child's risk of school problems.

Research which has explored the transmission of alcoholism from parent to child has generally failed to explore the mechanism through which that transmission occurs. This omission can lead to an unjustified view of transmission as a simple genetic process, the expression of which is triggered by factors in the environment distinct from the parent's alcoholism. Our results emphasize the fact that the alcoholic parent has an impact on the child's environment long before the child is exposed to alcohol. These environmental factors in turn increase the child's risk of developing school problems. The family backgrounds provided by alcoholic fathers and the school problems they generate then in turn predict alcoholism. We have previously shown this final step for the men who served as the fathers of these children (Robins et al., 1968). A history of broken homes, truancy, and high school dropout predicted alcoholism in the parent generation.

There is every reason then to expect that the effects we have shown of fathers' alcoholism on family setting and consequently on children's school performance may play a crucial role in the transmission of the father's alcoholism. The transmission of alcoholism between generations may require the alcoholic father's providing his child not only with a genetic predisposition to alcoholism, but also with the genetic and environmental triggers that lead to school problems and so enhance the expression of the genetic predisposition to alcoholism. The Danish studies (Goodwin et al., 1973, 1974) which show transmission of alcoholism both when offspring are and are not adopted do not negate this possibility. By definition every adoptee has experienced a broken home and many no doubt have the other five unfavorable circumstances as well: young fathers, illegitimacy,

parents who failed to complete their education, and fathers who were arrested. Many of those who remained with the fathers suffered broken homes as well, presumably plus many of the other disadvantages. What the Danish studies do show is that these family factors in the absence of parental alcoholism are insufficient to create alcoholism.

Studies of the transmission of alcoholism from parent to child that do not examine the chain of pathologies through which that transmission takes place can produce an illusion of simplicity. Further, they may seem to conflict with studies that emphasize family and personality structure as predictors of alcoholism when no real conflict exists. Our results suggest that parental alcoholism, family structure, and pre-alcoholic behavior patterns form a complex of closely interrelated patterns that are passed on together from generation to generation. It may well be that whichever element one selects from this complex structure to predict subsequent alcoholism will work about equally well. The interrelatedness of alcoholism with other pathological behaviors and with triggering family settings presents both a challenge and a hope to those who would prevent the transmission of alcoholism from one generation to the next.

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TABLE 1: SCHOOL SUCCESS AND DELINQUENCY IN CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS

	<u>Total</u>		<u>Children of Alcoholic Fathers</u>		<u>Children of Non-Alcoholic Fathers</u>		<u>p</u>
<u>Elementary School</u>	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Repeated semester	132	61	62	66	70	56	n.s.
Seriously truant	132	17	62	24	70	11	<.05
<u>High School</u>							
Did not graduate	137	36	70	44	67	27	<.03
<u>Police</u>							
Delinquent	153	24	78	28	75	20	n.s.

TABLE 2: EFFECTS OF FATHER'S ALCOHOLISM ON CHILDREN'S CIRCUMSTANCES AT BIRTH AND LATER

<u>Circumstances at Child's Birth and Rearing</u>	<u>Total</u>		<u>Children of Alcoholic Fathers</u>		<u>Children of Non-Alcoholic Fathers</u>		<u>p</u>
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Father < 19 years old	(136)	10	(78)	27	(81)	9	<.02
Illegitimate	(159)	13	(78)	19	(81)	7	<.03
Father dropout	(159)	60	(78)	75	(81)	44	<.001
Mother dropout	(131)	63	(69)	70	(62)	55	<.10
Broken home	(145)	61	(77)	70	(78)	45	<.01
Father arrested	(151)	80	(77)	92	(74)	68	<.001

TABLE 3: EFFECTS OF FATHER'S ALCOHOLISM ON CHILDREN'S TRUANCY AND DROPOUT IN VARIOUS SETTINGS

Circumstances at Birth and Rearing	Percent of Children							
	Truant				Dropping Out			
	Alcoholic Father		Not Alcoholic		Alcoholic Father		Not Alcoholic	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Father <19 at Birth	(12)	33	(7)	0	(17)	65	(6)	33
Father 19+	(50)	22	(63)	13	(53)	38	(61)	28
Illegitimate	(10)	40	(6)	17	(12)	67	(4)	25
Legitimate	(52)	21	(64)	11	(58)	40	(63)	27
Father a Dropout	(46)	30	(30)	10*	(54)	54	(30)	33
Father a Graduate	(16)	7	(40)	12	(16)	13	(37)	22
Mother a Dropout	(38)	26	(30)	17	(43)	39	(29)	38
Mother a Graduate	(17)	0	(26)	4	(19)	37	(25)	4*
Broken Home	(41)	22	(29)	17	(48)	50	(27)	37
Intact Home	(20)	25	(38)	8	(21)	29	(37)	19
Father Arrested	(56)	27	(46)	15	(64)	47	(43)	35
Father Never Arrested	(6)	0	(24)	4	(6)	17	(24)	12

*p<.05

TABLE 4: COMBINED EFFECTS OF CIRCUMSTANCES OF BIRTH
AND REARING WHEN FATHER IS ALCOHOLIC

Children's Outcomes	Number of Birth and Rearing Disadvantages											
	0 - 2						3+					
	Total		Fa Alc		Fa Not		Total		Fa Alc		Fa Not	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Truant	50	8	11	9	39	7	82	23	51	27	31	16
Dropout	47	13	10	10	37	14	90	48	60	50	30	43

Total 0-2 disadvantages vs. Total 3+: Truancy, $p < .05$; Graduation, $p < .001$.

0-2 disadvantages vs. 3+ disadvantages, controlling on Fa Alc: Truancy n.s.,
Dropout if Fa Alc, $p < .03$; Dropout if Fa Not, $p < .02$.

Fa Alc vs. Fa Not, controlling on number of disadvantages: not significant.